

Garbage slides into Salt River

Activists had warned about Tri-City Landfill last year

By Steve Yozwiak 1/9/93
The Arizona Republic

Environmentalists' fears were realized Friday when raging floodwaters breached the Tri-City Landfill north of Mesa, sending rafts of garbage flowing into the usually dry Salt River.

A year ago this week, state and federal investigators began looking into the operation of the landfill after news reports said rainwater runoff had washed debris from the dump into the Salt.

Because the dump, which has served as many as 500,000 east Valley residents, is operated by the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, state and federal officials quickly backed off.

Officials of the state Department of Environmental Quality said they have no jurisdiction over Indian-operated landfills.

Officials at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said they are unsure of their jurisdictional responsibilities on Indian reservations.

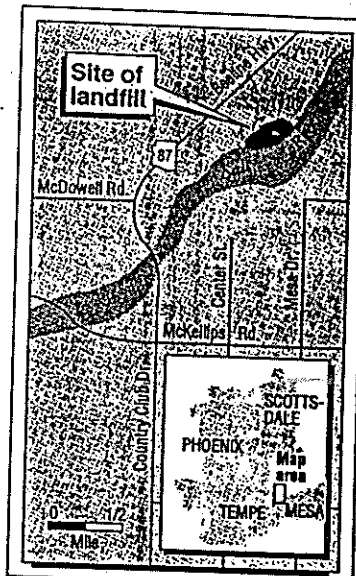
If the landfill, near McDowell Road and the Beeline Highway, was not on Indian land, officials said, it would have been closed long ago because it lies in a floodplain and is unlined.

For years, environmentalists and state officials have worried about contaminants from the landfill seeping into underground drinking-water aquifers. But the tribe has operated the landfill along the river's banks in much the same way since it opened in the early 1970s.

Tribal officials repeatedly denied last year that the landfill was being eroded. They maintained that the trash came from illegal dumping upstream, despite witness reports and an *Arizona Republic* canoe expedition that documented garbage from the landfill making its way into the river.

On Friday, there was no doubt. "It is beginning to erode," said Frank Mertely, manager of the Indian community.

Mertely said dozens of truckloads of large boulders that the tribe began dumping on the banks



Gus Walker/The Arizona Republic

of the landfill were not enough to hold off the rapidly rising river.

"It's sickening," said Mary Jensen, co-chairwoman of Legacy of the Southwest, a southeast Valley environmental group, after watching garbage break away from the banks of the landfill and float down the river.

"I think it will be even more shocking when the river starts to recede," Jensen said. "The Tri-City Landfill garbage is going to wind up in Buckeye."

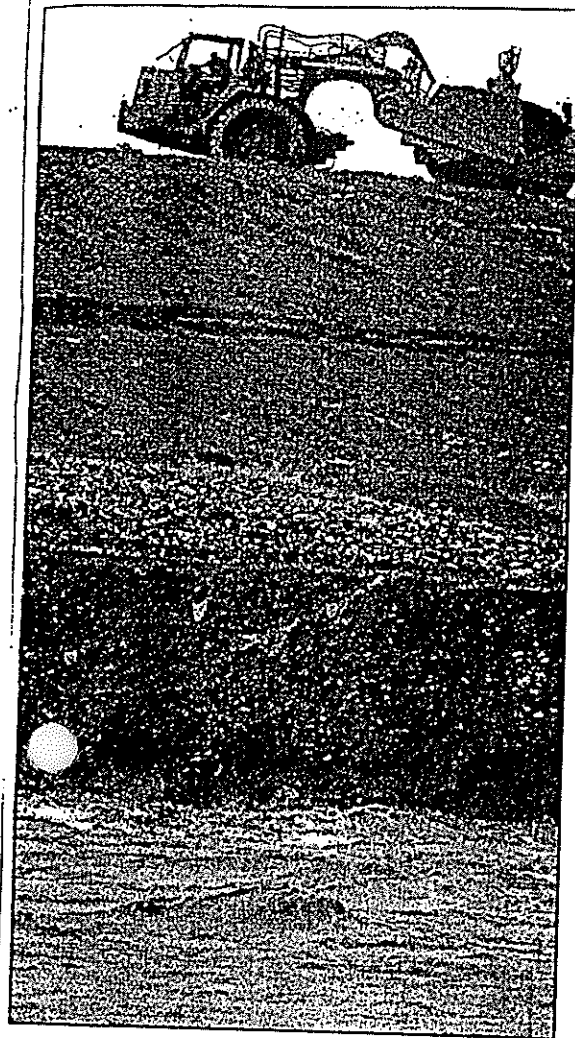
Scottsdale and Mesa officials, as well as the tribe, should be responsible for any cleanup because those cities continued to ship their garbage there even after the landfill's problems were reported, Jensen said.

Ray Garrison, Scottsdale's assistant city manager, said his city will haul commercial waste collected this weekend to a county landfill. Scottsdale officials on Monday will decide whether to abandon use of Tri-City, he said.

Garrison said Scottsdale continued to use Tri-City because city officials believed that fortifications placed there last year by the Army Corps of Engineers would ensure that the landfill would hold up.

But those fortifications also were no match for Friday's floods.

City Manager Charles Luster said Mesa will continue using Tri-City.



Tom Story/The Arizona Republic

Floodwaters eating away at the landfill's banks uncover trash and wash it down the river. Efforts to hold the water at bay Friday were ineffective.



Michael Ging/The Arizona Republic

At the Tri-City Landfill, a bulldozer attempts to shore up the landfill's banks, which were being eroded Friday by the Salt River.

"I don't know that our hauling municipal waste there has anything to do with that (erosion)," Luster said.

Jensen praised Tempe officials for deciding last year to withdraw from Tri-City and send their garbage to a private landfill south of Phoenix that meets all new federal specifications.

On Oct. 1, a federal law will take effect requiring all municipal landfills to be lined and out of floodplains. That law also specifically gives the EPA jurisdiction over landfills on Indian reservations.

DEQ Director Ed Fox said Friday that tribal officials have said they will close Tri-City and open another landfill outside the floodplain, one that meets federal specifications.

But Mertely said federal funds needed for that have not been received.

Fox, in a letter sent Thursday to the EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers, said he is concerned about the slow federal action.

"This environmental threat is at least 10 years old, and further delay cannot be accepted," Fox said, adding that the state is looking into what legal actions it can take.

Environmentalists said Friday that they do not believe that the tribe will meet the deadline for closing the landfill, that the tribe and city officials simply are "stalling," and that the state is acting too late.

Steve Brittle, president of Don't Waste Arizona, said he has exhausted negotiations between his environmental group and the tribe and cities, and is preparing to seek a court-ordered injunction that would close the Tri-City Landfill immediately.

"They (local, state and federal officials) always, for political reasons, have backed off. It shows how irresponsible everyone is," Brittle said.

"It's obvious that things are going to get worse."

APPEARED IN MINI-CLOS